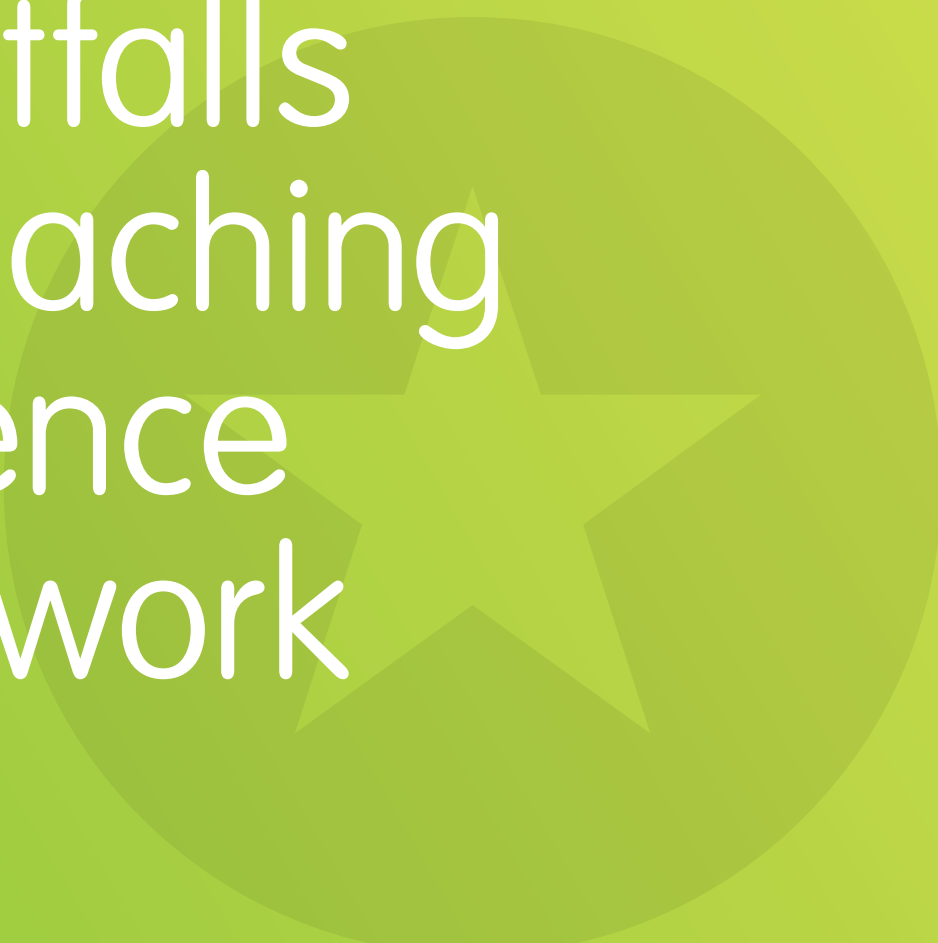


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Policy briefing

# The possibilities and pitfalls of a Teaching Excellence Framework



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This policy paper has been written by Pam Tatlow, Chief Executive of million+, and Professor Dave Phoenix OBE, Chair of million+ and Vice-Chancellor of London South Bank University.

#### **About the authors**

Pam Tatlow is a qualified teacher with a B.Ed. and an MA who worked in schools and colleges prior to taking up roles in education, health, and public affairs. She was appointed as Chief Executive of million+ in 2007 and was awarded an honorary doctorate for services to Education by the University of Bolton. Professor Dave Phoenix is a scientist who was elected to the Fellowship of the Royal College of Physicians (Edinburgh) for his contribution to medical research and education and recognised by the Academy of Social Sciences for work in areas linked to educational policy. He has been Vice-Chancellor of LSBU since January 2014.

Interest in high quality teaching in universities is not new. Successive governments have made commitments to improve and reward teaching excellence in a quest to ensure that students benefit from the high quality teaching that they deserve. Inevitably this interest has been pursued within the different strategic and political priorities of the government of the day. Higher Education and Treasury Ministers have frequently found themselves balancing this interest with commitments to maintain and improve the unit of resource per student in real terms, fund additional student numbers and respond to employer demands for graduates with 'employability' skills – with universities and students sometimes caught in the cross-fire.

Most recently the Conservative government took office following the May 2015 general election with a manifesto commitment to introduce a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) for universities in England.

What this meant in practice was not spelt out in any detail but Ministers subsequently linked TEF outcomes with individual institutional ‘permissions’ to increase tuition fees by inflation<sup>1</sup> – a proposition that had not been the subject of any prior consultation with either universities or students. The TEF – and especially the link with fees – have important and wide-ranging implications for students, universities and the UK’s international standing in the higher education market. It is these wider implications, as well as some of the practical problems associated with the introduction of the TEF, that we have sought to explore in this policy paper.

### Promoting teaching quality

Initiatives to enhance the quality of teaching in universities have not been confined either to the present government or to the UK. From 2005, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) supported the establishment in English universities of Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs). Investment was provided by the then Labour Government and was additional to the grant for teaching, the majority of which was directly provided to universities via the funding council.

The CETL programme represented HEFCE’s largest single funding initiative in learning and teaching with a total additional resource of £315 million made available from 2005 to 2010<sup>2</sup>. The investment was part of a broader move to enhance the status of learning and teaching in higher education with CETL-type schemes funded in several countries including Sweden, Finland and Norway.

The UK’s Higher Education Academy (HEA) has worked to enhance the quality and impact of learning and teaching in universities during the same decade. Originally supported by government grant to the four funding councils in the UK and by institutional subscriptions, the HEA arose from discussions within the higher education sector which were rooted in a desire to promote evidence-based teaching methods and standards.

<sup>1</sup> In his Summer Budget speech the Chancellor of the Exchequer said “we’ll link the student fee cap to inflation for those institutions that can show they offer high-quality teaching” 8 July 2015 <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/chancellor-george-osbornes-summer-budget-2015-speech>

<sup>2</sup> *Summative evaluation of the CETL Programme*, HEFCE, Dec 2011.

## Students at the heart of the system

In 2011 a *Higher Education White Paper*,<sup>3</sup> published by David Willetts, the Conservative Universities and Science Minister in the UK's Coalition Government, signalled a renewed government interest in placing high quality teaching 'at the heart of the university system' in England. The White Paper referred specifically to 'well-informed students driving teaching excellence'. The political context for this initiative was somewhat different. From 2010 higher education policy and funding regimes in England were predicated on the extension of a pro-market approach. Much of the direct investment in teaching previously provided by government to HEFCE was withdrawn and replaced by an increase in the higher tuition fee cap to £9000 per annum per full-time course with an associated expansion of the student loan system. Unsurprisingly, the idea of students as 'consumers' of higher education in an HE marketplace has received much more attention with the merits of this approach hotly debated in the public and political domain.

For universities – and modern universities in particular – interest in high quality teaching through the delivery of an innovative array of teaching and learning activities has not depended on government interest. High quality teaching and learning and the way it is assessed are at the heart of their business. As such teaching and learning do not stand apart from the research and scholarship that are integral to both a university as an institution and to the delivery of a university education.

It is hard to quarrel in principle with an initiative to enhance the quality of teaching. Nonetheless, there are grave doubts about whether an assessment-driven TEF linked with fees is the best way to improve teaching excellence throughout the sector. This is not to be complacent. Far from it. The hyper-concentration of research funding in a few institutions with more exclusive student profiles has undoubtedly created different institutional drivers.

**"It is hard to quarrel with an initiative to enhance the quality of teaching but there are grave doubts about whether an assessment-driven TEF linked with fees is the best way to improve teaching excellence."**

<sup>3</sup> HE: *Students at the Heart of the system* BIS, June 2011  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/31384/11-944-higher-education-students-at-heart-of-system.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/31384/11-944-higher-education-students-at-heart-of-system.pdf)

Ministers are right to suggest that many universities have not been given due recognition for the quality of their teaching or their achievements in educating students who enter university at different ages from a wide range of backgrounds with varied pre-entry qualifications. Encouraged by commercially driven university league tables, English (and UK) higher education have been bedevilled by historic reputation based on research rather than a more holistic view of what the 'good' university should deliver. It might therefore have been reasonable for Ministers to hope that the TEF had the potential to challenge old and out-dated HE hierarchies.

So why has the TEF not been welcomed with greater enthusiasm by university leaders and students? It is, perhaps, the very richness and variety of the teaching and learning activities in universities together with concerns about the validity and reliability of an assessment-based approach which are the source of the doubts. In addition discussion about the TEF risks diverting attention away from the case for more direct investment in higher education. There are, after all, three players in the market: government, universities ('HE providers' to use the government's term) and students. There are legitimate questions to be asked, in the context of the TEF but also more broadly, about whether it is students who should pick up even more of the costs of higher education, albeit through a state-backed loan system.

While much attention has been paid to the merits or otherwise of using metrics and baskets of metrics to assess teaching excellence, just what are the products and the processes that Ministers think could be measured? The reality is that the outcomes of university teaching cannot simply be evaluated by degree outcomes or graduate earnings. Teaching and learning are complex, multi-faceted and dynamic and linked with a wide-range of different qualifications and study routes.

Teaching in English universities (as in the rest of the UK), covers the full-range of subjects and applied disciplines. Unlike a national or school curriculum geared to attainment in nationally regulated and recognised subjects and courses, universities have a record of developing and accrediting degree programmes linked with new and innovative areas of study to meet economic, environmental and societal challenges.

Subjects can be taught and studied as single honours degrees or in a combination with other subjects as joint or specialist honours including through modular programmes. Full-time and part-time modes of study may be offered as well as lower-level higher education qualifications. Working in partnership with professional bodies and employers, modern universities offer courses linked to a wide-range of professions with some programmes specific to a certain industry or service. Many professional courses are taught at postgraduate level and are designed to meet statutory and regulatory standards and confer a licence to practice. Some degree programmes are sandwich courses. Others require extensive periods on work placements with assessment associated with the latter while some are work-based. International students study alongside their home and EU counterparts.

Disciplines, subjects and markets change and modern universities have proved particularly agile in responding to the demands of teaching for new and emerging markets. Middlesex University was the first university to offer a business degree – a subject initially shunned by ‘traditional’ institutions – and has long supported an internationally recognised centre to promote work-based learning. Abertay University in Dundee was the first university in the world to offer a postgraduate qualification in computer games. The creative industries account for one in twelve jobs in the UK and employ a high percentage of graduates. Modern universities play a key role in the success of this sector: 73% of students studying for a first degree in a creative subject do so in modern universities while these same universities account for almost 50% of postgraduates studying creative subjects.<sup>4</sup>

Yet until very recently the courses associated with the newer creative industries and the universities that taught them, were often publicly derided. Programmes were described disparagingly as ‘mickey mouse’ degrees. By 2013 the UK’s creative industries were the second fastest growing sector of the economy and only surpassed by real estate. This success has been underpinned by graduates taught in modern universities on courses many of which did not exist 15 years ago. It is worth pausing to consider how they might have fared in their early days in a peer review led TEF.

**“Modern universities have proved particularly agile in responding to the demands of teaching for new and emerging markets.”**

<sup>4</sup> *Creative Futures: Ten steps to support the creative economy*, million+, 2015



The 2011 White Paper's idea that students should be at the heart of the system as 'consumers and purchasers' of services is one that many universities and students would regard as limiting. Approaches to teaching and learning have been adjusted so that students are actively engaged as co-partners in the development of their university's approach to learning. Universities have been at the cutting edge of developing imaginative new teaching, learning and assessment methods. Student-centred teaching and e-learning have been integrated into programmes. Action-learning sets, problem-based learning, role-play and role-play scenarios, simulations and simulated work environments are just some of the teaching and learning methodologies which have been incorporated into course delivery.

Teaching, learning and assessment – at least in modern universities – have increasingly been linked to graduate employability. Students are encouraged and supported, not only to develop the intellectual capabilities and skills required for the world of work, but also to develop the social dispositions which underpin civic engagement and community involvement.

In this rich and varied environment of teaching and learning, the commitment to develop a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) looks challenging. One thing is certain: overlaying the TEF on the complex and innovative array of teaching and learning activities which take place in universities *and* linking outcomes with institutional inflationary fee increases is fraught with problems.

There are real and distinct differences between initiatives which enhance teaching quality, develop and promote best practice and standards and a TEF that seeks to measure and assess teaching quality on a sector-wide or subject basis. In many universities enhancing teaching and learning quality already includes requirements for staff to study for professional teaching qualifications. There are schemes which promote teaching fellowships as well as reward and recognition in pay and promotion systems.

There is also the knotty problem that there is no agreed definition of teaching excellence and certainly not one that can be applied easily to an assessment and metric-based approach to measuring teaching quality. This is not unique to the UK. Internationally, agreement about the definitions of teaching excellence are as hard to find as the Holy Grail.

**“Agreement about the definitions  
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Nor is it easy to agree how the characteristics associated with high quality teaching can be reliably compared both within, and between, highly complex organisations whose institutional autonomy has enabled them to offer varied teaching and learning environments, methods of assessment and course programmes. This is not to absolve universities of responsibility for high quality teaching – exactly the opposite. However, responsibility to improve practice and enhance performance is entirely different from a comparative metric-based assessment of teaching quality between institutions or subject areas. Apart from the potential for legal challenge from students and institutions themselves, such an assessment runs the risk of being administratively burdensome and, at the present time, could only be based on data measures designed for other purposes and which have their own flaws and shortcomings.

While some UK surveys<sup>5</sup> of students have confirmed that there are variations in student opinion, for example in relation to contact hours, evidence from the international market continues to suggest that UK universities are highly regarded for both the quality of their teaching as well as the quality of their research. In fact there are good academic reasons why simplistic measures like contact hours may vary. The delivery of teaching, learning and assessment are complex and cover a wide range of courses, scenarios and university missions.

There are also distinct differences between the attitudes of students in Scotland compared to those in England when questions about value for money are raised<sup>6</sup>. Unlike their peers in England, Scottish students who study full-time do not have to pay tuition fees. While in principle higher education is free at the point of access south of the border for first-time undergraduates, 90% of English full-time students take out a tuition fee loan and a maintenance loan to fund their higher education. Differences in funding regimes – rather than differences in the quality of teaching – are likely to be the primary reason why students in England are much less satisfied that their universities are providing value for money than their Scottish counterparts.

This is not to deny that students and parents may well be justified in wanting more information or improvements in the delivery of teaching on some courses in some universities. Perceived and real short-comings need to be addressed. However, any suggestion that a Teaching Excellence Framework could be an accurate and reliable signpost for high quality teaching per se, runs the risk of seriously misleading ‘consumers’ and would require a government health warning in capital letters.

In fact overall, there is little reliable evidence to support the contention that teaching in English universities is not up to scratch. Even if there was, current data sets are an inadequate basis on which to develop a TEF with potential implications for the unit of resource.

**“Current data sets are an inadequate basis on which to develop a TEF with potential implications for the unit of resource.”**

<sup>5</sup> *Student experience survey* pub Hepi-HEA 2015 <http://www.hepi.ac.uk/2015/06/04/2015-academic-experience-survey/>

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid* Hepi-HEA

## The limitations of data and metrics

The much quoted National Student Survey (NSS) is at best a pen picture but it does highlight issues that universities then seek to address. However, many variables are at play. English universities are remarkable in the diversity of their student profiles. It is hardly a surprise that campus based universities frequently score more highly in overall NSS student satisfaction rates. But is this the result of high quality teaching and the delivery of a brilliant student experience or in part, a reflection of the more socially exclusive profiles of the student bodies of these universities and the environment in which their studies take place?

There have been suggestions that the TEF should include a measure of 'learning gain'. Many modern universities have long argued that there should be greater recognition of their achievements in supporting students on varied educational journeys. However, assessing learning gain is not as straightforward as sometimes implied. Universities accept different pre-entry qualifications. Descriptions of institutions in tariff terms are misleading. Some universities have excelled in accepting students on the basis of accrediting prior learning (rather than just pre-entry qualifications) while the Open University has no entry requirements at all. Part-time students take longer to complete. Mature students often balance work-life and study commitments and for some of these students, the award of a degree may be a major achievement in itself even though it may not be an honours degree.

The Universities Minister, Jo Johnson, has suggested that the Teaching Excellence Framework may provide greater recognition for widening participation and learning gain.<sup>7</sup> Such recognition would be welcome but robust ways of capturing learning gain need to be developed, tested and evaluated. Currently there is little basis for agreement and no reliable data 'capture' at the present time.

Neither are the outcomes of the Destination of Leavers in Higher Education (DLHE) surveys plain sailing as a TEF measure. Based on surveys of students at 6 months and three and a half years after graduation, they have well-recognised limitations. The surveys rely on graduates self-reporting earnings with varied response rates. Little account is taken of the different employment and earning trajectories associated with different careers and the portfolio careers typical of some of the creative industries are completely ignored.

The definitions of graduate jobs and in particular, 'non-professional' jobs have not kept pace with employer requirements. Little wonder then that the qualitative data behind the DLHE surveys are under review by the Higher Education Statistics Agency. Part-time graduates may already be in work or in the alternative, be hoping to begin new careers – and none of this takes account of the advantages accrued through cultural capital and family background.

<sup>7</sup> Jo Johnson MP 1 July 2015  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/teaching-at-the-heart-of-the-system>

It is well-evidenced that students from black, minority and ethnic backgrounds do not achieve the same degree outcomes as their white peers once all of the variables have been taken into account. In this respect, BIS Ministers and OFFA are right to target the importance of universities renewing their efforts to seek to ensure equity of attainment. However will this important work really be enhanced by a Teaching Excellence Framework linked with fees?

### Legal challenge and game-playing

And then there is the potential for legal challenge in a market in which the Competition and Markets Authority increasingly has a say and for institutional game-playing. Everyone knows that the easiest way to improve NSS scores is to scrub the courses that perform least well. In the Research Excellence Framework, universities make careful calculations about which staff to enter. Such behaviour is completely rational and may well align with institutional interests but it has little to do with student interests and improving the student experience.

There is no reason to suppose that an assessment-based TEF linked with fee increases would be immune from similar considerations. BIS 'guess estimates' that the TEF might be worth a 3% uplift in the fee cap by 2017, seem far-fetched given current RPI rates. But if there is skin in the game in terms of funding, universities like other organisations can be expected to consider how to get the best outcomes. This may – or may not – be the same as improving the quality of teaching.

Finally the TEF cannot be divorced from the UK's quality assurance system. Since 1997, the UK has benefitted from an independent quality assurance system. This has underpinned reputation in the domestic and international markets. In line with the development of students as co-partners in learning, the quality assurance system now involves students.

While there are aspects of the current system that are unwieldy and require review, an independent and co-regulatory quality assurance system that is risk-based and proportionate must be retained – but it should not be compromised by the TEF. Any suggestion that institutions successful in the quality assurance regime may be judged as falling short in the TEF or in the alternative, are judged as not reaching some TEF 'gold standard' would be highly damaging. It would undermine the reputation of universities within the UK and in the international higher education market and it would risk undermining the quality assurance process itself.

**“Any suggestion that institutions successful in the quality assurance regime may be judged as falling short in the TEF would undermine the reputation of universities within the UK and in the international higher education market.”**

## Investment, fees and quality assurance

In all this, it is imperative that universities and students restate the case for government investment in teaching. In England fees derived from students via the Student Loan Company now have to be used by institutions, not only to invest in teaching but also to underpin capital investment and a host of others areas where direct government funding has been withdrawn. For their part, students are entitled to expect high quality teaching whatever and wherever they study and at whatever age they enter university. There is something counter-intuitive about a proposal that students should pay more fees for high quality teaching to which they might reasonably think that they should already be entitled.

However, if no direct investment is forthcoming – or if the November 2015 Spending Review undermines the unit of resource and cuts further into what remains of direct grant – there is every reason why there should be an uplift in the fee cap by 2017 to meet the increased costs of provision regardless of any TEF and provided that universities have been successful in quality assurance. Fees will have been frozen for 5 years with direct investment substantially reduced during the period.

An inflationary uplift in the fee cap is required to meet the costs of the high quality teaching that students have a right to expect in all universities – not as a ‘reward’ assigned to a few.

Following the Chancellor’s summer budget, both BIS and to some extent the university sector have assumed that TEF and fees will be linked. However there are good reasons to moderate this direction of travel. BIS should continue to work with HEFCE, HEA, QAA and universities to consider how high quality teaching in English universities can be further promoted and enhanced. Models of best practice and different institutional strategies should be identified, evaluated and disseminated. There is a strong case to continue to examine the data sets and other evidence that might help to better understand the different environments and drivers which support high quality teaching. However, BIS and the Treasury should accept that if universities have been successful in the quality assurance regime they should be able to lift fees by inflation in 2017.

**“If universities have been successful in the quality assurance regime they should be able to lift fees by inflation in 2017.”**

An Ofsted-style teaching excellence framework with bronze, silver and gold ratings linked with further fee variability, risks creating new administrative and bureaucratic burdens and would not be a sound or robust basis on which to create greater competition in the market. Such a framework has the potential to reduce risk-taking and innovation in teaching, learning and assessment but it also risks undermining the UK's global reputation for high quality higher education – a reputation that has been hard-won and well-earned.

Ministers want to promote high quality teaching, social mobility and open up new opportunities to those from communities who have not previously benefitted from access to a university education. Universities should welcome and embrace this agenda and work with BIS to achieve it. However, a TEF that resulted in universities becoming much duller places in which to study and work and which undermined the UK's international reputation for high quality teaching and research would be a real own goal.

**“In contrast, a Teaching Excellence Framework that was resourced to enhance, evaluate and disseminate best practice in the rich and varied learning environments that universities offer, would be a prize worth having.”**





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